

PRUDEN ON POLITICS By Wesley Pruden



This is what we were afraid of

Gallup told us yesterday what most of us in the news business had already suspected. The great Reagan arms scandal is boring the pants off everybody else.

Only 1 in 5 Americans, the poll finds, is reading the story closely. The pollsters don't say, because they probably didn't think to ask, but they might have been told further that almost nobody understands half of what he does read about who sold what to whom, and why.

Not only that, but more people believe Ronald Reagan's version than don't, more people believe the business hasn't really hurt him than do, and 61 percent of the voters surveyed think the president is doing a pretty good job. Some of them think he's doing even better than that.

Andrew Kohut, the president of the Gallup organization, seemed a little chagrined about this whole business, because it was the Los Angeles Times that commissioned the poll.

"Obviously," said the polling man, "there is more bad news for the administration than for others."

Actually, it isn't obvious at all. The worst news of all is for the reporters and editors, not necessarily excluding me, who are obsessed with the story.

Only about 1 in 5 of all Americans have a very high regard for reporters, and newspapers and television newscasts are rated about equally miserable.

This is unusual in itself, because television news usually rates a little better than newspapers. Many television news ~~watchers~~ don't know how to read, and people tend to ~~mistrust~~ what they can't understand, and most newscasts, with their car wrecks and whirling blue lights, look "believable" because they closely resemble the soaps and the cops-and-crooks dramas that follow the newscasts.

"Relatively few people are watching or reading," Gallup's man says, attributing this trend in part to the fact that the Iran-Contra case is an "extremely complicated story without the drama of a hostage-taking."

Those who are keeping up with the story are generally people who already hate Mr. Reagan, and are looking for something to feed their neurosis, or those who like the president a lot, and are curious to

see how he punches out his critics one more time.

There are even indications that the editors of The Washington Post, who revel in this sort of Reagan-bashing, are getting a little bored with it all. The Post is beginning to run the same stories two or three times, occasionally stopping to freshen up the label in the manner of the small-town movie house of a generation ago that recycled old movies by advertising them as "Brought Back by Popular Demand!"

Even Bob Woodward, the Pop Gun at The Post, seems a little tired, too. But he makes the effort. On one morning this week, writing from his clips, he reported on Page One that the CIA had given the Contras \$13 million for training and assistance under an order signed by Mr. Reagan.

A wayward reader, discovering this story under a blob of his morning oatmeal, might have imagined that Mr. Woodward had unearthed a mighty scandal. Was this money diverted from widows and orphans? Had Ollie North robbed the Federal Reserve Bank? Was this the celebrated smoking gun?

Anyone who read as far as the third paragraph learned, alas, that it was nothing but a bureaucratic shift of Official U.S. Government Money "explicitly permitted by Congress in legislative compromises made in late 1985."

The Democrats should have known they were in trouble when nobody could come up with a name for this scandal, if in fact it can even be accurately described as a scandal. You can't get "arms for Iran/funds for the Contras" on a bumpersticker, and Irangate is an unimaginative cliché, so dull it couldn't even catch on with anchorpersons. Iran-Scam works only in print. Northgate sounds like a shopping center.

Unless the Democrats find a transfusion for it soon, this one's going to start smelling funny.